

Flashback:

# Toward Ideal

Twenty years later, Pluhar's commitment is unchanged.

by Lyndee Stabel

Change can be scary. People stick to comfortable routines because change means a risk of failure, but it can present opportunities. Only those who are not afraid to change can open the door. Chuck Pluhar of Cohagen, Mont., has always managed and kept records to know when the risk or routine was greater than any fear of trying something new.

At 68, Pluhar has spent 50 years in the cattle business on the ranch homesteaded by his grandparents more than 100 years ago. Five generations later, it's still a family operation with son Jeff and grandson Jason as vital members of the team.

Hereford cattle were the mainstay when Pluhar signed on for life right after high school. In 1970, a change in the weather led to a change in the type of cattle on the ranch.

Sunshine reflecting off snow from a spring blizzard affected udders so severely on those Hereford cows that many calves were kicked if they tried to nurse. That was when he decided to switch to Angus cattle.

"We had 400 cows at the time, and because of their sunburns, we had to milk 150 of



PHOTO BY JASON PLUHAR

► "We live in a dry climate, but these cows seem to work here," Chuck Pluhar says. "I was impressed with how they did this past year, even with the drought." Mothering ability, adequate milk and disposition are key selection traits.

them twice," Pluhar says. "That will make you a believer in the need for change."

## Making the switch

Today the ranch has 315 Angus cows and 140 heifers, built up from another change he went for a few years after establishing the Angus base. Since 1979, artificial insemination (AI) has added to those genetics on heifers and promising young cows.

It's a functional herd, "pretty maintenance-free," Pluhar says. That has been increasingly important.

"We live in a dry climate, but these cows seem to work here," he says. "I was impressed with how they did this past year, even with the drought." Mothering ability, adequate milk and disposition are key selection traits.

Early adoption of AI opened the door for Pluhar as a cooperator in progeny testing for the American Angus Association's Structured

Sire Evaluation Program. He made it possible to gather data on hundreds of calves by young registered sires and compared to those of reference sires through the 1980s and 1990s.

That's one reason the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand honored the Montana rancher in 1993 with its Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award.

## Partnering at the feedlot

For more than 12 years now, Pluhar's backgrounded calves not kept for replacements have been sent to Beller Feedlot, a CAB partner yard near Lindsay, Neb.

Premiums for carcass merit are one measure of herd production, and Pluhar trusts manager Terry Beller to help the calves they own together reach their full potential.

"We really like partnering with the

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PHOTO BY MIKE BELLER

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producer because it keeps them involved,” Beller says. “I treat all my customers the same, but when I know they have a stake in it with me, it always gives me that extra kick to do really well for them. They want to see me make money, and I want to see them make money, too.”

Some measure of success can be seen in the carcass contests. In 2004 a pen of heifers Pluhar did not keep for replacement reached 98% Choice or better with 34% CAB and Prime in the National Angus Carcass Challenge (NACC). That won a reserve champion title, and the partners split a \$2,000 prize.

They both keep their minds and eyes open to new programs or management practices that can complement the herd genetics and pull in some added premiums.

“Chuck is really progressive and always willing to step up and try new niche markets,” Beller says. For several years, he has qualified all calves as age- and source-

verified. One year he even tried the non-hormone-treated market, but went back to the primary CAB target and conventional production.

In the sire-evaluation years, Pluhar used individual carcass data to pick out areas where he could improve his cattle. Today he monitors that success using group data from packers, but still considers it as a factor in making changes.

“We’ve accomplished our goals for frame and performance,” he says, but health, fertility

and ribeye size are three specific areas now targeted for more gains. Over the years, he says, it seemed that certain genetic lines had more problems with sickness or fertility, so making improvements has been a process of finding what genetics work in his herd.

Cattle have been getting bigger over time and so have the cuts of meat. It’s a trend that cannot be ignored.

**“Last year’s Angus calves went 95% Choice and 54% CAB. Straight-Angus generally have the advantage because their grading is going to be better.”**

**— Terry Beller**

“I don’t think consumers really need or want a ribeye any bigger than it is today, but it’s what the industry wants,” Pluhar says. “The bottom line is they want a tender, tasty piece of beef, and we need to make sure we’re giving it to them.”

### Experimentation and hesitation

Since he first switched from Hereford to Angus, the average ribeye area in his cattle has increased by at least a square inch, but he would like to add one more to have a 13- to 14-inch ribeye.

Not sure exactly how to get there, in 2011 Pluhar “experimented a little” and tried a ¾ Angus, ¼ Simmental bull to see if he could move any closer to that goal. The jury is still out.

“I’m not totally sold on this deal yet,” he says. “I’m pretty happy with our Angus cows. Their biggest asset is their consistency, and our calves get more consistent all the time. My biggest reservation in adding Simmental is the amount of variability it could create in the calves.”

The strong Angus base may keep things in balance. “Hopefully we’re using good enough Angus genetics that by adding a touch of Simmental we’ll only create some hybrid vigor,” he says.

Beller also hopes the base of Angus genetics built will keep quality-grade level high for his partner.

“His calves have always graded really well,” the feeder says.

“Last year’s Angus calves went 95% Choice and 54% CAB,” Beller says, noting a below-average share of Yield Grade (YG) 4s. “Straight-Angus generally have the advantage because their grading is going to be better.”

As Pluhar works to get the herd exactly the way he wants it, he has Beller’s full support. They are more than just business partners, and when the feedlot manager comes up to personally help load cattle, it is not because of any concerns with quality or anything else. It’s just a good opportunity to visit a friend.

“I feel perfectly comfortable with Chuck loading the calves. He won’t send me anything that’s questionable,” Beller says, “And if something does happen to slip through the cracks, he’ll stand up for it, because we both want to see each other improve and create a good product.”

With three generations from a long ranching history working now, together with a good feeding partner and a fearless attitude, the Pluhar Ranch will keep creating the best beef profitably possible for a long time to come.



**Editor’s Note:** Lyndee Stabel is a freelance writer for Certified Angus Beef LLC.